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SUBJECT: GOAM CREATES HIGH SCHOOLS; ADDS TWO YEARS OF SCHOOLING

¶1. Summary: The Government of Armenia has announced the opening of 150 high schools by the end of 2011. This new development is an incremental expansion of a 2008-09 pilot program which aims to improve educational quality and create a 12-year educational system roughly modeled on the U.S. experience. While the expansion of the pilot program is a positive step, the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) faces several implementation challenges, including displacement of teachers and students, curriculum concerns, teacher recruitment and retention, and a potentially negative impact on rural students. End summary.

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50 schools at a time  
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¶2. In a recent press conference, RA Minister of Education and Science Spartak Seyranian announced the opening of 150 high schools by the end of 2011. The schools are the latest development in a process that began in 2006 to turn the 10-year Armenian school system into a 12-year program aimed at improving the quality and efficiency of secondary education and offering additional academic support to students. A year ago the GOAM approved a "Strategy Paper on the Creation of a High School System" and announced a pilot program of 10 senior high schools in Yerevan and in the regions of Shirak, Gegharkunik and Aragatsotn. The GOAM allocated 8.6 million dollars to reform the schools and develop a new curriculum, particularly emphasizing math, physics, natural sciences, and the humanities.

¶3. Based on the pilot program's initial success, largely determined by student test scores and public response (after just half a year!), the MOES will begin to incrementally open more high schools, averaging 50 a year. By 2012, these 150 high schools will represent roughly 10% of Armenia's 1,410 public school facilities. The program is being implemented with the support of the World Bank, which has provided funding for curriculum development, new textbooks, teacher training, and technological support. The MOES has agreed to renovate schools and pay for the development and publication of selected textbooks. This month, an updated version of the reform policy is to be submitted to the RA government for final approval.

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Going the distance for a better education  
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¶4. Seyranian has publically stressed the MOES' obligation to ensure high educational standards. He has noted that high schools are intended to serve as a transition from comprehensive education to higher education, and that a 12-year curriculum aims to ensure students gain the necessary knowledge and skills to compete at a university level. Seyranian has also stated to the press that, "The task of a high school is not to prepare students for entrance examinations, but to prepare knowledgeable people capable of ensuring the country's progress in a rapidly changing modern world."

This generally reflects GOAM emphasis on educational competitiveness and the role that it plays in the country's economic development, but also addresses parental concerns that the current curriculum does not equip students with the skills and knowledge required to continue on to higher education. (Note: many parents hire private - and expensive - tutors to prepare their children for

entrance examinations and stories abound of students, overloaded with assignments from their private tutoring, missing their regular classes.) Another commonly expressed grievance is that conventional schools fail to prepare graduates for the labor market and fail to equip them with skills for independent living.

15. While the program has been positively covered by the press and well received by the general public, several challenges remain. The plan is to turn certain designated schools into four-year high schools and distribute the students in lower grades to the surrounding schools that will be losing their 9th and 10th graders. The same will apply to the teachers. This is certain to create dislocations and inconveniences for students and teachers who will have to travel farther to their new schools. Students in rural villages may have to travel to neighboring towns for secondary school. Some may be unable or choose not to do so. Primary schools receiving new students may decide for budgetary reasons to increase teacher-student ratios rather than employ the surplus teachers. The many educators who teach classes that span 8th and 9th grade will no longer be able to do so. Teachers may not have the background or training to prepare students in the new 11th and 12th grades for the university. Finally, curriculum concerns include a potential lack of vocational training for students who do not intend to enroll in a university and a "too demanding" workload in which students potentially could spend up to 36 hours in the classroom per week.

16. COMMENT: How these concerns will be addressed remains to be seen. However, high school reforms are a positive step in meeting MOES educational goals and speak to the GOAM's interest in improving educational quality in Armenia. PAS continues to support the MOES in educational endeavors, sponsoring Fulbright scholars, and working with IREX to place Muskie alumni in advisory positions at the MOES

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to assist with reforms.

Pennington